

The Cambridge Companion to

# CONDUCTING

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edited by  
José Antonio Bowen  
*Georgetown University*



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## Contents

*List of illustrations* [page vii]

*Notes on the contributors* [ix]

*Preface* [xv]

*Acknowledgments* [xviii]

### Part I • Practice

- 1 The technique of conducting *Raymond Holden* [3]
- 2 Conductors in rehearsal *Charles F. Barber* [17]
- 3 Studio conducting *Michael Haas* [28]
- 4 The conductor and the soloist *Joseph Silverstein* [40]
- 5 Choral conducting *Vance George* [45]
- 6 Opera conducting *Sir Charles Mackerras* [65]
- 7 The orchestra speaks *Robert L. Ripley* [79]

### Part II • History

- 8 The rise of conducting *José Antonio Bowen* [93]
- 9 The Central European tradition *José Antonio Bowen and Raymond Holden* [114]
- 10 The French tradition *David Cairns* [134]
- 11 The Italian tradition *Michael Rose* [146]
- 12 The American tradition *José Antonio Bowen and David Mermelstein* [163]
- 13 The English tradition *Stephen Johnson* [178]
- 14 The Russian tradition *David Nice* [191]

### Part III • Issues

- 15 The conductor as artistic director *Bramwell Tovey* [205]
- 16 Women on the podium *J. Michele Edwards* [220]
- 17 Conducting early music *Bernard D. Sherman* [237]
- 18 Training conductors *Harold Farberman* [249]
- 19 The composer-conductor and modern music *Martyn Brabbins* [262]

*vi Contents*

20 Managers and the business of conducting *Stephen Wright* [274]

21 The future of conducting *Leon Botstein* [286]

*Notes* [305]

*Bibliography* [324]

*Index* [341]

## Illustrations

### Figures

- 1.1 Beat diagrams for music in 2, 3, 4, and 6 [page 6]
- 1.2 Photograph of Richard Strauss in 1898 [11]
- 3.1 Michael Haas with Claudio Abbado in rehearsal for a “live” recording of Schumann’s “Scenes from Goethe’s *Faust*,” but with further patched sessions [31]
- 5.1 Brahms, *Ein deutsches Requiem*, analysis of fourth movement [47]
- 5.2 Brahms, *Ein deutsches Requiem*, overview [48]
- 5.3 Common conventions for marking parts [59]
- 7.1 Charles Munch conducting the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1956 with Zino Francescatti as the violin soloist [84]
- 8.1 Frontpiece of Johann Gottfried Walther, *Musiklexicon* (1732) [96]
- 8.2 Weber conducting at Covent Garden in 1826 [102]
- 8.3 “Forte and Piano,” anonymous caricature of Liszt conducting (c. 1851) [111]
- 9.1 Poster for a concert by Bülow and the Meininger Hofkapelle [115]
- 9.2 Photo of Bülow and the Hofkapelle in Berlin [117]
- 9.3 Three Bayreuth conductors: Hermann Levi, Hans Richter, and Felix Mottl [119]
- 11.1 Caricature of the Neapolitan composer Nicola Logroscino banging on the side of his harpsichord (Pierluigi Ghezzi, c. 1740/50) [148]
- 11.2 Angelo Mariani at the time of the premiere of *Aroldo* in 1857 [152]
- 11.3 Verdi in 1879, a cartoon in *Vanity Fair* published when he visited London to conduct the *Requiem* [154]
- 12.1 A cartoon of Theodore Thomas conducting one of his summer concerts in New York’s Central Park [166]
- 12.2 Pierre Monteux in rehearsal with the Boston Symphony Orchestra in the summer of 1958 at Tanglewood [168]
- 13.1 “I Spy” caricature of Michael Costa in *Vanity Fair* (July 1872) [179]
- 15.1 Sir Henry Wood among the ruins of London’s Queen’s Hall in 1941 [206]
- 15.2 Bramwell Tovey with Leonard Bernstein, conducting a festival of the composer’s music with the London Symphony Orchestra in 1986 [218]
- 16.1 Josephine Weinlich conducts the professional Vienna Ladies’ Orchestra at the old Steinway Hall, New York (1871) [221]
- 16.2 Ethel Leginska dressed to conduct (unidentified newspaper clipping, New York Public Library) [223]
- 16.3 Marin Alsop in action with the Colorado Symphony [229]
- 20.1 Stephen Wright in discussion with Sir Colin Davis [282]

## Music examples

- 1.1 Mozart: Symphony No. 35, first movement, opening measures [6]
- 1.2 Liszt: *A Faust Symphony*, third movement, opening measures [7]
- 1.3 Mozart: *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*, second movement, opening measures [7]
- 1.4 Liszt: *A Faust Symphony*, first movement, opening measures [7]
- 1.5 Liszt: *Tasso*, opening measures [8]
- 1.6 Liszt: *Les Préludes*, opening measures [8]
- 1.7 Liszt: *Die Ideale*, opening measures [8]
- 1.8 Rossini: Overture to *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, opening measures [8]
- 1.9 Haydn: Symphony No. 54, first movement, opening measures [9]
- 1.10 Beethoven: Symphony No. 1, fourth movement, opening measures [9]
- 5.1 “O Sacred Heart Now Wounded” (Hans L. Hassler [1601] harmonized by J. S. Bach, *St. Matthew Passion*, 1729) [49]
- 5.2 Operatic colors in “Libera me” from Verdi’s *Requiem* [53]
- 5.3 “Aufersteh’n” from fifth movement of Mahler, Symphony No. 2 [55]
- 5.4 “Yo-oh,” pulsing for articulation [56]
- 5.5 “For unto us a child is born” from Handel’s *Messiah* [57]
- 6.1 “Hier soll ich dich denn sehen, Konstanze” from Mozart’s *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* [66]
- 18.1 Beethoven: Symphony No. 1, second movement, with new beating patterns [260]
- 19.1a 2/16 with one triplet per beat [267]
- 19.1b 2/4 with one triplet per beat [267]
- 19.2 Richard Causton’s *Notturmo* (Oxford University Press, 1998) [269]

# 1 The technique of conducting

RAYMOND HOLDEN

Any discussion of conducting technique can be problematic. The potential for disagreement over what constitutes a conductor's technique is huge, so this chapter will be limited to the ways in which conductors express their thoughts and ideas through physical movements, the tools they use, and the skills that they employ.<sup>1</sup> The film footage of conductors like Willem Mengelberg, Wilhelm Furtwängler, Klaus Tennstedt, and Pierre Boulez demonstrates that there are as many styles of conducting as there are conductors, and to attempt to codify, to dissect, and to analyze fully the variety of gestures used by conductors is beyond the scope of this, or perhaps any, chapter. Although the gesticulations that they use seem to vary widely, all conductors' techniques have a basic task in common: to act as a kind of conduit through which their ideas are transmitted to the musicians. Of course, body movements are not all they use: a conductor also communicates verbally in rehearsal and makes eye contact with fellow performers throughout the performance process. A member of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra once remarked laconically to the present author that "it matters not whether a conductor stands on his head and wiggles his toes or beats time like a metronome as long as his intentions are clear." While the first position described has more in common with yoga than music, the player's basic thesis has merit; clarity of intention is paramount for any conductor.

## The baton

The tool that is most often associated with the conductor is the baton. Today, batons are still used commonly and their length and materials vary according to the requirements of the individual conductor. Generally, they are made of light wood with a point at one end and tapered to a grip, usually made of cork, at the other. Conductors who use batons often have them made to their own specifications, insisting on a stick that suits their physical demands and the nature of their performance style. Sir Henry Wood, for example, had his batons made by Palmer's of Great Yarmouth, and his requirements were set out precisely:

[3]

#### 4 *Raymond Holden*

WEIGHT: Slightly under 1 ounce

LENGTH of exposed Shaft: 19 inches  
of Handle: 5 [inches]

TOTAL LENGTH: 24 [inches]

SHAFT made of seasoned straight-grain poplar wood, carefully rived by hand to ensure that the grain runs straight. Painted white with two coats of water paint. The shaft runs right through the handle.

HANDLE of cork 5 inches long, diameter at base  $1\frac{1}{4}$  inches, diameter at shaft end 1 inch.<sup>2</sup>

Sir Henry's preference for long batons was not shared universally. Herbert von Karajan preferred a short baton, while Sir John Barbirolli opted for a stick of moderate length, arguing that "it is as absurd to use a baton which resembles a diminutive lead pencil as it is to wave a weapon of exceeding length and frailty."<sup>3</sup>

The baton is usually held in the right hand, though some left-handed conductors hold it in the left. The ways in which batons are held vary as widely as the styles of batons used, but many conductors hold the grip between the thumb and the first two fingers. This was the approach suggested by Max Rudolf who wrote that "the most advisable way to hold the baton is with the thumb, first and second fingers, and with the butt against the palm of the hand."<sup>4</sup> Ideally, the method of holding the baton should ensure that the stick acts as an extension of the arm, and that the point of the baton is the focal point of the beat.

Some conductors, however, prefer not to use a baton. Pierre Boulez, who beats time with his bare hands, argues that with smaller contemporary ensembles, "the more one is inclined toward contemporary music, the less one needs this particular extension."<sup>5</sup> Other eminent conductors who did not use a baton included Leopold Stokowski and Dimitri Mitropoulos, both of whom were leading figures in the performance of twentieth-century music. Stokowski's use of bare hands gained wide exposure with the release of Walt Disney's film, *Fantasia*. It has often been argued that his abandonment of the baton was an act of showmanship, a notion that should be treated with caution. In his book, *Music for Us All*, Stokowski explained his reasons for conducting with bare hands, arguing that "whether or not a conductor uses a baton is of little importance. Personally I find a baton unnecessary – I am convinced that unessentials should be eliminated."<sup>6</sup> Choral conductors also tend to conduct without a baton. This is particularly common for conductors who perform in churches and cathedrals. As the singers often stand close to the conductor and have rehearsed extensively with him or her, the use of subtle hand gestures can be interpreted more easily. But conducting without a baton has provoked a hostile response from those who prefer to use a stick. Bruno Walter, for example, argues that "the renunciation of the

baton . . . carries the seeds of decay.”<sup>7</sup> For him, the baton extends “the obviously restricted beat of the bare hand, magnifying it to distantly visible proportions” and enhancing the “clarity and plausibility of its movements, a better aid to precise orchestral playing.”<sup>8</sup> While it is hard to reconcile the notion of decay with the practices of Stokowski, Mitropoulos, and Boulez, Walter’s advice is generally sagacious.

Whether or not a conductor uses a baton is a matter of personal choice, but whichever method is chosen, it must have direct relevance to the music being performed. Leonard Bernstein believed this to be true and stated: “if [the conductor] uses a baton, the baton itself must be a living thing, charged with a kind of electricity, which makes it an instrument of meaning in its tiniest movement. If [the conductor] does not use a baton, his hands must do the job with equal clarity. But baton or no baton, his gestures must be first and always meaningful in terms of the music.”<sup>9</sup>

### **Beating patterns and tempo**

One of the primary functions of the baton, or the hand in which it is customarily held, is the indication of the music’s beat with both vertical and lateral movements. While gestures vary, the basic beating patterns are relatively standard. In general, the baton should move in a fluid manner, with the beats being outlined at the point of the stick. Fig. 1.1 illustrates the various patterns that are commonly used today. If the music is to be rendered fast, slow, staccato or legato, the conductor must manipulate the stick accordingly, using short, long, jerky and smooth gestures that are in direct proportion to the effect required.

The preliminary beat, commonly known as the upbeat, is one of the conductor’s most important gestures. Otto Klemperer remarked that “it’s the upbeat and not the downbeat that makes an orchestra attentive,”<sup>10</sup> a notion that is shared, at least in part, by Wilhelm Furtwängler who argued that “it is not the instant of the downbeat itself that produces the precision with which the orchestra enters, nor is it the precision of the conductor’s gesture but the way he prepares for it.”<sup>11</sup> To achieve a clear upbeat, Bernstein suggested that a conductor should treat it “exactly like breathing: the preparation is like an inhalation, and the music sounds as an exhalation.”<sup>12</sup> Although this might sound peculiar, a short, silent, rhythmic intake of breath often helps to communicate the conductor’s intentions to the players. Whichever approach is used, clarity of movement is essential. As the upbeat directly precedes the first sound rendered, the speed, character and direction of the movement has a direct bearing on the initial tempo of the work.



## 7 The technique of conducting

Example 1.2 Liszt: *A Faust Symphony*, third movement, opening measures

Allegro vivace, ironico *pizz.* *f*

Violine I

Violine II *pizz.* *f*

Bratsche *pizz.* *f*

Violoncell *p* 6

Kontrabass *p* 6

Example 1.3 Mozart: *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*, second movement, opening measures

Andante

*p*

Example 1.4 Liszt: *A Faust Symphony*, first movement, opening measures

Lento assai  
mit Dämpfer

*ff* *p*

and the character of the music to be directed. In Ex. 1.5, a vertical downbeat is usual; in Ex. 1.6, a vertical downbeat followed by a lateral movement to the left is common; while, in Ex. 1.7, a vertical downbeat followed by lateral movements to the left and then the right are customary. Ex. 1.8 can be approached in two different ways. If the Andante is played by a competent, professional orchestra, a single vertical upbeat is sufficient, but, if the

8 Raymond Holden

Example 1.5 Liszt: *Tasso*, opening measures

Lento

*ff*

3 3

Example 1.6 Liszt: *Les Préludes*, opening measures

Andante

*p*

pizz. arco

Example 1.7 Liszt: *Die Ideale*, opening measures

Andante.

a 2.

2 Flöten.

*sf*

*p smorz.*

2 Hoboen.

*sf*

*p smorz.*

2 Klarinetten  
in B.

*sf*

*p smorz.*

2 Fagotte.

*sf*

*p smorz.*

Example 1.8 Rossini: Overture to *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, opening measures

Andante maestoso

*ff*

*pp*

## 9 The technique of conducting

Example 1.9 Haydn: Symphony No. 54, first movement, opening measures



Example 1.10 Beethoven: Symphony No. 1, fourth movement, opening measures



ensemble is inexperienced, two preliminary beats might be necessary: first, a lateral movement to the right, followed by a vertical upbeat.

Indicating the continuation of the music after a pause can be difficult. In Ex. 1.9, a vertical upbeat followed by a vertical downbeat to mark the resumption of the normal pulse at the start of the next bar is appropriate; while, in Ex. 1.10, a lateral movement to the right followed by a vertical upbeat would serve the same purpose. In passages that are either rhythmically difficult or subject to rubato, the beat might need to be subdivided. But subdivisions can often be misleading and unnecessary, and should only be used in a controlled manner. If used indiscriminately, they can interrupt the flow and direction of the music.

Setting and holding a suitable tempo is one of the conductor's primary functions. Indicating the desired tempo can only be done by giving a clear and precise preliminary beat; therefore, the conductor must have the tempo firmly in mind before making this gesture. Sergiu Celibidache argued that the best method of doing this was to subdivide the pulse mentally before making the preliminary beat.<sup>13</sup> This approach is particularly useful when conducting a slow tempo, where a broad upbeat can be problematic. When conducting a work that contains metronome marks, the performer is confronted with ethical, historical, and aesthetic problems. If a work has metronome marks that suggest very quick tempi and if the orchestra is amateur, it might be necessary to modify the speeds accordingly. In the case of compositions such as Beethoven's Symphony No. 4, where the tempi of the first (*Allegro vivace*) and last movements are linked, any adjustment to the printed speeds should reflect these relationships.

For ballet conductors, the needs of both the dancers and the composer must be considered. As dancers rely heavily on an organized pulsual plan,

the conductor must ensure that the various performance tempi correspond to any prearranged scheme. When conducting opera or choral music, the conductor must allow time for the singers to breathe and should pace the phrasing accordingly. Similarly, wind players also need to breathe and the tempo and pacing of the phrasing must be judged according to the needs and abilities of the ensembles being directed.

Often, young professional conductors will act as an assistant conductor, directing off- and on-stage bands. As these groups are generally placed at some distance from the main orchestra, the assistant conductor, when following the speed and beat of the senior colleague, might use a television monitor. From this monitor, the assistant can relay the tempo to the off- or on-stage band. In some circumstances, when the distance between the main and the subsidiary ensembles is particularly great, the assistant should beat slightly in advance of the conductor, so as to compensate for any time delay; this delay will vary according to the exact distance between the two groups and the venue's acoustics.

When accompanying in concertos, the conductor must be prepared to anticipate the soloist's reading and be ready to respond quickly to any unexpected acts of *rubato*. In passages where the orchestra is silent, the conductor should mark these bars with a single downbeat; this helps the orchestral players count the empty bars. When working with singers, the conductor needs to be especially vigilant, and when accompanying recitatives, the pacing of the drama is paramount. By indicating the recitative's isolated chords in a clear and unequivocal manner, the conductor can control the speed and direction of the stage action. These chords can be indicated by the following methods: first, they can be beaten only as they occur; or, second, the conductor can continue to beat metrically throughout the course of the recitative, giving a more decisive gesture when a chord has to be played.

## The left hand

Richard Strauss (1864–1949) famously dismissed the importance of the left hand arguing that it “has nothing to do with conducting.” For him, “Its proper place is in the waistcoat pocket from which it should only emerge to restrain or to make some minor gesture for which in any case a scarcely perceptible glance would suffice.” He felt that it is “better to conduct with the ear instead of the arm . . . [then] the rest follows automatically.”<sup>14</sup> As if to underline his argument, Strauss posed for a photograph (Fig. 1.2) in 1898 in which he is shown facing the camera with the baton held high in the right hand and the left-hand thumb inserted into his waistcoat pocket. What Strauss



Figure 1.2 Photograph of Richard Strauss in 1898

objected to most was replicating the motion of the right hand with the left, a practice that is both confusing and superfluous. Hermann Scherchen (1891–1966) also objected to this approach and warned that “the student [should] avoid the duplicating, simultaneous use of both arms, which never renders his motions clearer for the orchestra, more expressive, or more relevant. On the contrary, the practice robs a conductor of an important resource as regards expressive, representative conducting.” Moreover, when the left hand “remains independent of the right arm’s motions . . . the use of the left hand is a splendid method of articulating, intensifying, reinforcing,

emphasizing, hushing, and refining.”<sup>15</sup> The left hand should be used, therefore, to indicate entries, to shape the dynamics and the phrasing, and to gesture warnings.

## **Eye contact**

For the conductor, eye contact with the performers is of particular importance. The eye has the power to indicate entries, to alert the players and the singers to possible difficulties, and to act as an expressive device, complementing the motion of the arms and the stick. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, conductors stressed the importance of the eye. Richard Wagner recalled that Gasparo Spontini relied heavily on eye contact to achieve his results and refused to wear spectacles when conducting;<sup>16</sup> Richard Strauss held the baton at eye level to ensure the complete attention of the players and singers; Stokowski argued that “conducting is only to a small extent beating of time – it is done far more through the eyes,”<sup>17</sup> while Walter emphasised the importance of “seeing *eye to eye*” with the musicians.<sup>18</sup> Probably the most famous example of a conductor using eye contact to achieve his musical objectives was Arthur Nikisch. Throughout his career, commentators often mentioned his “mesmeric” style, which was related directly to his use of the eye. Nikisch’s reliance on eye contact is immediately apparent from film footage of him conducting in 1913.<sup>19</sup> Though the film is silent, his physical gestures are seen clearly, with his arms held high and the beat placed firmly at the point of the baton. By having the end of the stick function at eye level, the players were drawn into closer eye contact with him, and this, some commentators argue, was the source of Nikisch’s mesmerism. Sir Adrian Boult also commented on Nikisch’s use of the eye, but suggested that his ability to “mesmerise” was a consequence of sound musical practices, rather than an act of hypnosis. Boult recalled that “the curious slow gaze with which [Nikisch] seemed to take in the whole orchestra at the beginning of most rehearsals and of every concert gave him an opportunity of noticing everything and at the same time of getting on terms with everyone. Under such conducting it is easy for players to ‘feel unlike themselves’ and for observers to think they are being mesmerised.”<sup>20</sup> In contrast, Herbert von Karajan regularly conducted with his eyes closed, arguing that it helped him “concentrate on the inner content of the music.”<sup>21</sup> But, when performing choral music, he, too, performed with his eyes open because “sometimes it is a matter of establishing a direct human contact; and in choral music this must always be the case. With me the choirs never use music, which has the double effect: their eyes are not fixed on the page in front of them and they can communicate directly with me.”<sup>22</sup>

## **The podium**

While the podium has been linked with the popular notion that the conductor is the ruler of all he or she surveys, the box on which the conductor stands has little to do with the respect commanded.<sup>23</sup> Generally, the podium is a square, plinth-like platform that remained popular throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While there is no fixed height for the podium, it should be high enough for all the members of the orchestra and/or choir to see the conductor's beat. While many conductors continue to direct the music from an elevated position, some, like Nikolaus Harnoncourt, when working with early music groups or smaller ensembles, prefer to stand on the floor of the stage. Others, when performing music from the eighteenth century or earlier, direct from either the keyboard or the front desk of the violins. Though the above are the most common positions from which to lead a performance, some musicians are less orthodox. Peter Schreier, for example, conducts while singing in early vocal and choral music. Whether a conductor chooses to stand on a podium or prefers to remain on the floor of the stage is of little importance. Whichever method is chosen, it is essential that the beat is visible to all. For a conductor like Sir John Barbirolli, who was little more than five foot tall, the podium was an absolute necessity but, for others who are taller, it is of little consequence. The decision whether or not to use a podium, however, should be based on purely practical criteria and not by the notion that elevation is synonymous with talent and ability.

## **Preparation and interpretation**

Thorough preparation is essential for any conductor. A conductor must be able to read and to analyse a full orchestral score, have good communication skills, and be able to detect imperfections easily. In the late twentieth century, some aspiring conductors have turned to recordings as a study tool. While recordings are of value, they should not replace traditional methods of preparation. Of particular importance are good keyboard skills and an understanding of string technique. These allow the conductor to study the score at the piano and to make decisions about bowing. Where possible the conductor should use his or her own marked parts. If this is not possible, it is advisable to check the orchestral and vocal parts in advance, as they often contain textual errors. Although printed mistakes can be corrected in rehearsal, these encounters can sometimes be stressful and, when working under such conditions, imperfections can pass unnoticed, undermining the musicians' confidence in the conductor.

The conductor's role in interpreting the work has a long and complex history (see chapter 8). Realizing the composer's intentions is considerably easier when the composer is available for consultation and becomes more difficult as performance traditions and styles change. Current scholarly research is making some attempt to recover older methods and techniques of performing, but juxtaposing these concepts within a coherent musical whole can prove difficult. On the most basic level, the conductor must make decisions regarding tempi, dynamics, and balance. Often these are complementary and are influenced by the architectonics of the work being performed. Such judgments, though, can only be made after a period of intense preparation. For many conductors, their interpretations are the result of a long affinity with a particular composer, or school of composers. During their early years, both Wilhelm Furtwängler and Arturo Toscanini championed the music of their contemporaries, but later restricted their activities to Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, and Wagner. By restricting themselves in this way, these conductors argued they were better able to explore a limited repertoire in detail. For the average, jobbing conductor, however, the styles and types of music to be directed are often determined by practical imperatives. For example, a conductor in a German opera house must have a broad understanding of the standard operatic repertoire. As these performers are regularly asked to deputize for a colleague at short notice, the interpretation of a work is often determined by existing "house" trends. A chorus master, when preparing a chorus for a symphonic or operatic performance, must ensure that the singers are rehearsed in accordance with the musical demands of the main conductor. Similarly, when directing off- or on-stage ensembles, an assistant conductor must relay the intentions of the senior colleague to the stage band.

### **Conducting from memory**

Conducting from memory should only be attempted after extensive preparation. Walter, who began to conduct from memory late in his career, stated that, by performing without a score, he "realized . . . what it had been that had so strangely impeded [him] in the past."<sup>24</sup> By freeing himself of the score, he believed that "nothing stood any longer between [his] internal image of the music and [his] communication with the orchestra." For him, "independence of the score" was important in achieving "intensity and spontaneity in music-making" and was helpful in obtaining a "close spiritual contact with the orchestra." He warned, however, that "anyone who cannot trust his memory with absolute certainty . . . [should] have no qualms about putting the score on his desk." Moreover, "in rehearsals . . . the

score is indispensable . . . because it has to be consulted when an orchestral part gives room for doubt . . . [this, then, enables] conductor and players to resume their work after interruptions without delay.”<sup>25</sup> Mitropoulos took a different stance. He regularly rehearsed from memory using a method that, for some, seemed complex. Apparently, he used slips of papers on which he wrote letters and numbers that related to rehearsal letters and bar numbers found in the scores that he was preparing. When asked to clarify a query or to correct an error in rehearsal, he would close his eyes, tap his head, and mentally turn the pages of score he was conducting until he reached the relevant passage.<sup>26</sup> Mitropoulos justified his abandonment of the score by arguing “I feel the need to liberate myself from the printed score just as an actor does from the script. You would not expect someone to play Hamlet in front of a paying audience with the script in his hands – it’s the same thing with me and music.”<sup>27</sup>

Mitropoulos’s ability to memorize complex scores at will was not, and is not, shared by most conductors. Whether a conductor performs with or without the music is of little importance, a view shared by Barbirolli who stated “it is foolish to imagine that a man knows less about a work because he uses a score. On the other hand, it is just as foolish to accuse all those who dispose of them of being bluffers and charlatans. The prime duty of any conductor is to secure the best possible performance of any work with which he is entrusted, and to use such means as he conscientiously believes will ensure the best possible results.”<sup>28</sup>

## **Training and career opportunities**

Conductors, unlike instrumentalists, rely on others when practising their craft. Walter observed that the

conductor is denied [the] years of quiet, preparatory exercise, in which he could become familiar with his many-sided instrument and develop his technical mastery of it . . . To him alone, of all executant musicians, is denied the inestimable advantage of being able to try out matters in the quiet of his study . . . It is the complicated character of his instrument and indirect way in which it has to be played, and above all, the unavailability of the instrument at the time of his training, that prevent the conductor from setting out on his professional career with a degree of assurance and technical proficiency akin to that obtained by other musicians.<sup>29</sup>

It is clear, then, that for students of conducting, the route to a professional career can be both circuitous and difficult. While many conservatories, colleges of music, and universities offer courses in conducting, they often

lack the facilities necessary for aspiring conductors. Traditionally, professional conductors begin their careers by either working as orchestral players; rising through the ranks of the opera-house system; becoming choral conductors; or acting as assistants to major, international conductors. Many leading artists, including Hans Richter, Arthur Nikisch, Bernard Haitink and Nikolaus Harnoncourt, gained valuable early experience by playing in professional orchestras. In an opera house, young conductors, when employed as répétiteurs, work with professional singers, orchestral players, and conductors on a daily basis. The répétiteur's function as a rehearsal pianist provides first-hand experience of the music being performed. If the necessity arises, the répétiteur might deputize for the chorus master and, on some occasions, direct the stage bands. For conductors of larger choral groups, the opportunities to direct either amateur or professional ensembles occur according to the demands of the repertoire performed. While some choral conductors have made the transition from choirs to symphony orchestras, they rarely join the front rank of professional orchestral conductors; the skills necessary for each discipline are not transferred easily.

Most major international conductors employ an assistant. The assistant's role varies according to the needs of the individual conductor and the ensemble being directed. The assistant might conduct preliminary rehearsals, edit performing material, function as a rehearsal pianist and/or conduct off- and on-stage bands. This type of post is a useful way for an aspiring conductor to learn the profession. While the opportunities for a permanent appointment are limited, young conductors can also gain experience by forming and directing vocal and instrumental ensembles. Another means by which to become a professional conductor is to participate in conducting competitions. The criteria for acceptance into these events can be rigorous, and it is common for the competitors to have had considerable experience before being chosen.

Barbirolli argued "without any qualification whatever, that a conductor is born and not made."<sup>30</sup> While this thesis might sound harsh, it has merit. The physical gesticulations and tools that a conductor uses are merely the external manifestations of a wider artistic vision and are of little consequence without the innate ability to inspire, to motivate, and to educate. More important, a conductor is responsible to the composer, and the conductor's readings must reflect that responsibility. Bernstein believed this to be true, arguing that "perhaps the chief requirement of [the conductor] is that he be humble before the composer; that he never interpose himself between the music and the audience; that all his efforts, however strenuous or glamorous, be made in the service of the composer's meaning – the music itself, which, after all, is the whole reason for the conductor's existence."<sup>31</sup>